

comics and american studies

THE FAMILY UPSTAIRS: Introducing Krazy Kat (1910-12). By George Herriman. Introduction by Bill Blackbeard. Westport, Connecticut: Hyperion Press, Inc. 1977. \$17.95. Paper: \$8.95. ABIE THE AGENT (1914-15). By Harry Hershfield. Introduction by Peter C. Marzio. Westport, Connecticut: Hyperion Press, Inc. 1977. \$14.50. Paper: \$5.95. THIMBLE THEATRE: Introducing *Popeye* (1928-1930). By Elzie C. Segar. Introduction by Bill Blackbeard. Westport, Connecticut: Hyperion Press, Inc. 1977. \$17.95. Paper: \$8.95. WINSOR MCKAY'S DREAM DAYS (1903-14). By Winsor McKay. Introduction by Bill Blackbeard and Woody Gelman. Westport, Connecticut: Hyperion Press, Inc. 1978. \$17.95. Paper: \$8.95.

With discouraging regularity this journal receives articles on the comics and rejects them because our consultants find their authors knowledgeable and enthusiastic about their subject matter but innocent of ways to make that knowledge useful to Americanists. Here are some ruminations on kinds of interdisciplinary essays which we would like to see, along with passing remarks on the books listed above. These are part of a series, *Classic American Comic Strips*, one of several such collections brought out in recent years. Quality of reproduction is sometimes very low; a note from the publishers explains why: it is difficult to get clean copies from messy old newspaper originals, and bare legibility seems preferable to no information at all. The editing, however, is sometimes inexcusably sloppy. In *Dream Days*, several identical strips are repeated, a terrible waste of space in a volume which is a sampler to begin with. The editors' prefaces are generally useful, though I felt that Marzio underestimated *Abie*. He seems not to have noticed the impressive development in the course of its first (1914-15) year. Translation of the Yiddish in *Abie* would be very helpful and very easy to do. I don't know why reprint houses, which, since they use photographic processes, can put anything they want on the page, are so unimaginative. One wonders, incidentally, whether *Abie's* success wasn't in that period largely dependent upon Jewish

readers. How much, after all, could *goyim* understand of some of these jokes? (I have asked knowledgeable colleagues about this; they feel that, although recent American commercial humor is so shot through with Yiddish that many non-Jews have picked up a few phrases, only those relatively few who lived in New York in predominantly but not exclusively Jewish neighborhoods would have been likely, in 1914, to understand the Yiddish in *Abie*. Interestingly, my parents' sense of the matter is different. Both had extensive experience in neighborhoods of different kinds. Mom puts it strongly. "If you lived in New York in 1914, you knew a little Yiddish.")

Comic strip artists almost uniquely have to develop the rules of the games they are playing as they go. Although our main concern in this journal must be with the social and cultural information one can glean from the histories of these strips, it is worth noting that one feels terribly close to the sources of artistic creativity in looking over the formative frames of a brilliant new "comic." Readers who listen and look closely will understand why e.e. cummings felt that *Krazy Kat* was a work of high art. I would urge students of cummings to read the occasional prose pieces which Herriman produced in *Krazy's* name, to compare them with the prose preface which cummings provided for a collection of *Krazy Kat* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., Inc., 1946) and compare that in turn with the beautiful prose with which Walt Kelly prefaced his collections of *Pogo*. Cummings was nowhere closer to Herriman, and unknowingly to Kelly, than in his own lovely preface to the *Collected Poems* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1938).

Although terms to describe "levels" of art—such as high-, middle- or low-brow; or elite, standard, popular, folk—are not without meaning, individual Americans, artists and laymen, have always made use of anything that suits their fancy regardless of the medium or "brow"-level in which it is transmitted. Scholars working with such things should move as unselfconsciously from one genre to another as cummings did. Their conclusions should have special social import precisely because of the social implications of those changes of "level."

Its abstract topography—motifs from ancient Southwest tribal arts brilliantly made to read as landscape—and ritualistic, patterned scenario gave the later *Krazy* a deserved cult following. It was a brilliant strip with strange power, power apparent in its funniest episodes as well as in its occasional dark moments. The long popularity of *Popeye* was not accidental, either. Popeye did not come from the planet Krypton, but he, like the "superheroes," had an "origin story." His taking over *Thimble Theatre* is instructive in ways hard to define, but which have to do somehow with the nature of comedy. There is a force in the sailor which should interest students of myth as well. *Krazy* began in skinny frames squeezed under those devoted to the surreal and wonderful Dingbat family, the folks with the misfortune to live beneath "The Family Upstairs." "The Family Upstairs" has been generally forgotten, but I found it instructive, too. Like Herriman's later work, it is based on one looney situation on which the author plays manic variations. Aesthetic issues, perhaps, but not without mythic or cultural implications which ought to interest our field.

There are, of course, more obvious ways to use the strips to illuminate social and cultural processes: speaking as an editor thinking about how my consultants have reacted to the mss. on comics submitted to *American Studies*, I would say that next in importance to knowledge of the strips themselves, their history and the history of their techniques, is professional competence in whichever social or cultural process is under discussion. Authors of articles on the comics who are soundly trained in—as opposed to merely “sensitized” to—let us say, issues in race, religion, sex roles or ethnicity in America, would be able to say very useful things to the rest of us. We would all profit, for instance, from good discussions of the meaning of ethnic and racial stereotypes in the comics. In the present group, *Abie*, of course, stereotypes Jews. The meaning must be complex, first because the stereotype is reasonably affectionate, second because the author and, I have to believe, much of the audience, are themselves Jewish. (It is a little more complicated than this. Like Twain’s Jim, Abie sometimes steps out of character because of the demands of a comic routine.)

Jewish stereotyping in the comics is not always friendly. Hershfield, Herriman and McKay, moreover, also use fat-lipped caricatures of Black people. The stereotyping is generally pretty good-humored, as when Abie himself appears in blackface in a minstrel show at his lodge. In *Popeye* and *Dream Days*, “African cannibals” are drawn about the same way. These stereotypes appear, develop, change and disappear in a pattern which is worth studying and explaining. A student of such things could profit by a look at such comparable studies as Jules Zanger’s analysis of stereotyped literary dialects which appeared in this journal (“Literary Dialect and Social Change,” VII, 2 [Fall 1966], pp. 40 ff.); they might be methodologically suggestive.

All this is by way of an invitation; we are receptive to a certain (good) kind of article.

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reviews

TESTING THE ROOSEVELT COALITION: Connecticut Society and Politics in the Era of World War II. By John W. Jeffries. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press. 1979. \$16.50.

The author presents Connecticut as a case study of the emergence of the Roosevelt Coalition and of the stresses it underwent in the course of the Second World War. Major attention is given to ethnic divisions and to the increase of industrialization and urbanization, especially in response to war production needs, but the interplay of personalities among the leaders of both parties is not neglected. Voting statistics are skillfully integrated into the narrative. While Jeffries does not purport to offer a major thesis, his work is a model of political historiography.

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THE PORT OF NEW YORK: A History of the Rail and Terminal System from the Beginnings to Pennsylvania Station. By Carl W. Condit. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. 1980. \$29.95.